

Knocking on Heaven's Door

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 May 2004

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0:00] Please, Mum, can I have it? Can I have it, Mum? Please, please. Oh, pretty please, Mum, Mum, can I have it? Please.

Look, if you don't give it to me, I know you won't love me. I know you don't love me if you don't give it to me. Please, can I have it? Please. I want it. Give it to me. Please, give it to me.

And so, Mum finally gives in. Well, that's what I observed in my childhood with my sisters pleading to my mother.

They got what they wanted. Persistence pays off. If you nag long enough, you get what you want. And isn't that what Jesus is encouraging us to do in the Bible reading that Martin read for us a minute or two ago?

Be persistent and you'll get it. Nag on your knees long enough and God will cave in. After all, in the Bible reading that we read, it says, even though he'll not get up and give him anything because he's his friend, at least because of his persistence, he'll get up and give him whatever he needs.

[1:16] And isn't Jesus saying or implying that God is like this reluctant friend? Nag on your knees long enough and God will get up and reluctantly, perhaps, he'll answer your persistent request.

Isn't Jesus saying persistence in prayer will ultimately persuade God? So isn't Jesus saying nag on your knees? Well, let us pray as we come to these words.

O God, our Heavenly Father, we pray that you will teach us from the words of Jesus tonight to teach us about prayer and to teach us about you so that having a right understanding of you, we may pray better and pray persistently.

Amen. Well, a neighbour comes at midnight for three loaves of bread, maybe like three rolls rather than the loaf, tap, tap.

And that's because he's run out of bread and some friends of his or some people he knows or maybe doesn't even know very well have arrived on his doorstep at midnight of all times and he's got no bread left.

[2:34] And so in order to find a supply, he goes to his neighbour's house, wakes him up, knocking on the door to get three loaves of bread.

Now that scenario might look a little bit odd to us living in the 21st century. In the Middle East, in ancient times especially, you would often travel at night because it was cooler.

So therefore to arrive at a place very late at night would not be that uncommon. Sometimes if it's summer or even the months either side of summer, it would be very hot and you wouldn't want to walk and travel in daylight, in the heat of the day.

Secondly, in this ancient society still today to an extent, there is a great expectation and demand of hospitality. So if somebody comes to you hungry or needing a bed for the night, then even if you don't know them well, there is a greater expectation that you will provide for them, hospitality, food and so on.

And often very generously and very lavishly. And still today you see some of that in Middle Eastern society. Three loaves of bread might strike you as a lot for one person who's arrived at midnight, but they are probably small loaves.

[3 : 48] And they're probably like pita bread type loaves. That is, they're not great big puffed up loaves. They're probably fairly flat. So three smallish loaves might well do for one person who's hungry at midnight.

Also remember, of course, that there were no coals open 24 hours a day. I mean, some of you young people have never known anything other than that. Some of us are old enough to remember when supermarkets closed before midnight.

But there were no supermarkets in those days. There may have been shops and may have been bread shops. But probably at midnight, either the shops were most likely closed or they'd probably run out of bread.

Because bread would be baked each day and for that day and for that day alone, most probably. Either in a shop, you could buy it, or most people would probably bake their own bread anyway.

So that's the scene of this little story that Jesus in effect conjures up to make a point to his disciples who are with him and listening to him.

[4 : 48] He said to them, suppose one of you has a friend. Imagine this scenario, he's saying. That one of you has a friend and you go to him at midnight and you say to him, friend, lend me three loaves of bread for a friend of mine has arrived and I have nothing to set before him.

That's the scene that Jesus paints. And initially in verse 7, the friend, the neighbour, the neighbour appears very reluctant to meet the need of the person who's come knocking on his door at midnight.

He says to him, don't bother me. Well, that's not a very nice way to start off, but I imagine that if you were woken up at midnight with someone rattling on your door, you'd be tempted to say the same sort of thing.

That's happened to me over the years. I remember at 1.30am, someone banging on a window of my house to wake me up to give them money. In fact, to go down to the street with my credit card to get money out for them, which I didn't do, I must say.

He says, not only don't bother me, he says the door has already been locked and the implication of that is that it's actually been locked for some time. So he's been in bed for some time and probably some bolt has been put across his door.

[6 : 01] And then finally he says, my children are with me in bed. Now that might strike you as rather odd. You might want to start sending around some investigators to see what's going on in this family.

But in poor society, in Middle Eastern society, the family would probably all sleep in the same room. And what would happen is that at the end of the day, they would roll out their bedding on the floor or on straw or something like that and they would all basically sleep one next to each other.

These days we all have our own rooms, if not more than one room. Great more deal with privacy and so on. But what the man is saying is, if I were to get up, I'm probably going to wake up the rest of my children and household by stirring out of the bed.

And I don't really want to do that. And I guess those of you who are parents, who've got children, when they get to sleep, the last thing you want to do is wake them up again because they'll probably cry all night and so on. So here is a man who's reluctant to get up even for his neighbour in his plight at midnight wanting three loaves of bread for a visitor who's come to his doorstep.

But despite his reluctance, Jesus says, he'll nonetheless get up. He'll get up not because the man is his neighbour or because he's his friend, he'll get up because of his persistence, we're told in verse 8.

[7:22] I tell you, even though he'll not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence, he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

Now the word for persistence there has got that sense of keeping on asking, keeping on asking, keeping on asking, knock, knock, knocking on his neighbour's door. But the word has got other sorts of connotations as well and one of the meanings is to be shameless.

What that means is that the man who's knocking for bread is not ashamed to ask. He senses no shame asking, trying to get bread out of his neighbour even at midnight.

That is, it's slightly audacious in effect, knocking on his friend's door and because of that, the friend will give him what he wants. Now it's very easy, let me say, to misunderstand what Jesus is actually teaching here.

See, we often tend to think in our practice and in our prayers and maybe even reading this passage that somehow what Jesus is saying is that we need to keep persisting because God is a bit reluctant.

[8:38] That is, we sometimes think that Jesus is teaching here that God is like the man asleep with his kids and that we've just got to keep on nagging on our knees in order to finally persuade God to get up out of his bed and answer our prayers.

But Jesus is not teaching that. He'll in fact make that even clearer in the last part of the passage tonight when he goes to lengths to describe the willing generosity of God to answer our prayers.

Jesus is not teaching that God is reluctant. We have to recognise that what we're reading here in these verses follows on from what we saw last week, Jesus teaching the Lord's Prayer.

And so some of the context of Jesus' other teaching about prayer as well as what's in this passage itself sharpens our understanding of what Jesus is really teaching about God and about prayer here.

Firstly, the person is in need. that is the person is not knocking on the door asking if he can borrow the neighbour's car for a spin or if he can somehow get a great big chocolate cake or something like that.

[9:52] That is he's in real need. He's not looking for some selfish reason. He's actually in need on behalf of someone who's come to his own house. That is the request by knocking on the door is not to feed the person who's knocking but someone else.

He's not come for his own selfishness. He's asking for the benefit of someone else and it's a real need that he's in because of the expectations of hospitality in the ancient world especially.

But secondly, in the light of what we were taught in the Lord's Prayer, we understand the importance of what this man is saying because part of the Lord's Prayer, if you remember, is give us this day our daily bread.

here now is an example in a sense of somebody who is in need of daily bread if for a visitor who's come to his door at midnight. But if you remember back to the Lord's Prayer too, the other aspects of what he's asked for in the Lord's Prayer are not things that are selfish things for our own enjoyment or luxury or indulgence, but rather they are basic spiritual and physical necessities of salvation and of daily food or bread.

And that then gives us the context or the framework for understanding the words that Jesus will go on to say. Jesus has said what we should pray for in the Lord's Prayer.

[11:24] Now he's saying pray for those things persistently. Keep on praying for those things. Don't just pray once and never again.

But keep on persisting in prayer. And that then leads to the next point that persistence is not in an effort to persuade God who is reluctant to answer our prayers.

But rather persistence expresses our need. It expresses the importance of what we're asking for. It expresses the priority of those things for us.

You see, if you don't want something a lot, you might ask for it because you happen to walk down Doncaster Shopping Town and you spy in the shop the latest CD or clothing or whatever it is that you want.

And you might say to your mum and dad, oh, can I have that? But a minute later if you've walked on beyond that shop, you've forgotten entirely about it and you never ask for it again. If something is really important to us, then we will persist in asking.

[12:32] Now I guess parents begin to think about this late in the year when they think what am I going to buy little Jimmy and little Jemima for Christmas? And if you ask kids what you'll buy, they might come up with all sorts of exotic ideas.

But if over the course of a period of time the same thing crops up, a few weeks later they say, I really would like that train set or that Barbie doll or whatever it is, then you begin to realise that that actually matters to them.

That is something that they really want, they've persisted in asking for it. It wasn't just a fleeting desire but a persistent request. And so God when he's encouraging or urging us to be persistent in praying is wanting us to express to him what matters to us and what matters most.

He's already given us the content of what we should pray fundamentally in the Lord's Prayer and now teaching to be persistent in praying, Jesus is trying to encourage us not only to pray for the right things but to keep on praying for the right things so that our whole life becomes redirected in line with what God's intentions and purposes are.

Now to show that this persistence is not an effort that we must make to persuade a reluctant God to give, Jesus goes on with his teaching from verse 9.

[13:54] He says, so I say to you, that is, in the light of what I've just said about this illustration, now I add to this, I say to you, ask and it will be given you.

Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you. Now what an amazing statement. So often taken out of context.

So often removed from the Lord's Prayer and removed from the teaching about persistence in prayer. As though somehow we might just ask and it's all there. Dear God, I like this, bang, there it is, like genie in a bottle.

But that's not at all what Jesus is on about here. The words ask, search and knock are actually all in their tense, in the ancient Greek, continuous tense.

That is, ask and keep on asking. Search and keep on searching. Knock and keep on knocking is what Jesus is actually saying here.

[14:56] That is, persist in asking, persist in searching and persist in knocking. He's not promising here instant gratification when you ask for anything in prayer.

Secondly, though, he is directing us to the fact that God will answer. So ask and it will be given, that is, by God, for you. Knock and the door will be opened, by God, is the implication.

That is, what Jesus is saying here in verse 9 is that God does answer prayer. He's not reluctant. He's not holding back. He's not in bed with his kids saying, go away, I don't want you to bother me.

But he's ready to answer our prayers, unlike the reluctant neighbour friend of the man who had the visitor at midnight. So there is an element of assurance of answers to prayer here.

That's reiterated in verse 10 the same. For everyone who asks, receives, and everyone who searches, finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

[16:01] Now we must be careful here not to assume wrongly that Jesus is saying, ask for whatever you want and you'll get it.

And if you keep on asking for whatever you want, you'll get it. In the context of the Lord's Prayer and the person going, asking for bread for his friend at midnight, Jesus is not saying this is an open slather, pray for what you want.

That is, the Lord's Prayer has directed us to pray for the fundamental, physical, and especially spiritual necessities. Salvation in effect, praying for God's kingdom to become that will be part of it, kept from trial, and receive forgiveness as we forgive others, as well as supplying our daily bread.

In effect, the Lord's Prayer is praying for salvation and that we enjoy and keep on being part of the salvation kingdom of God in effect. So that's the content of what we ought to be praying for.

And when Jesus says, ask, and it will be given to you, search and you'll find, knock and the door will be opened, it's not saying, ask for a brand new car, it's not saying, search for perfect exam results, it's not saying, knock on the door of getting a great job at the top of 101 Collins Street or something like that.

[17:23] But rather, it's dealing with the issues of prayer from the Lord's Prayer for our basic, physical and especially spiritual necessities. That's also seen in the language that's used.

You see, knock and a door will be opened implies entry into the presence of God. If it's God who's opening the door, as the language suggests, it's about coming to be with God.

And certainly, the language of search or sometimes in translation, seek, is almost always used in the context of search for God, seek God. And God's not playing hide and seek with us is what Jesus is saying.

If you're searching for God, you'll find him because he'll allow himself to be found. Now, it's not talking about fleeting knock on the door, yes, God, if you're there, please answer my prayer.

It's for someone who's deliberate and serious, someone for whom this matters. So they ask and they keep on asking, they search and they keep on searching, they knock and they keep on knocking. It's not promising that God will just instantly answer the sort of fleeting prayers.

[18:27] Somebody drives past a church and thinks, oh, maybe I should be a Christian. God, are you there? Show yourself to me. And then they drive on and they see McDonald's and it's gone out of their mind. But it's for someone who's deliberate, purposeful, in persistently praying and searching for God.

That's really the context of what's going on here. It's not an open slather to pray for what you want and expect that you'll get what you ask for every time. The Lord's Prayer is to guide us to be attuned to God's will in effect and to place ourselves under it and within his kingdom.

So ask, search and knock so that we may be part of that and keep on asking, searching and knocking and God will surely answer. I remember when I was working in ministry in early years, not here, in another place, the person who was the boss of where I was working, would often come up with ideas and say, I think we should do this.

And so he'd go away from a meeting thinking, okay, this is the latest thing, I better do it. But he had more ideas than we actually ever did. So I began to learn that if he said, we should do this two or three times in the course of a few days or a week or two, I knew that it was big in his mind.

But I wouldn't run around trying to say, do everything that he ever suggested because by the time I saw him next time, something else had cropped up. Now I don't mean to be critical of that person, but I began to learn that there was an element of persistence that I needed to detect so that I knew where he was headed in a significant way.

[20 : 03] And that's what God's really wanting from us. He's wanting us to demonstrate persistence, seriousness, about what we're asking for in prayer to do with our basic spiritual and physical necessities.

Now in order to really make sure that we don't misunderstand this because so far you could still say, well, doesn't this still imply that God's a bit reluctant? The last part of this teaching on prayer wipes away that misunderstanding completely.

Jesus asked some rhetorical questions to direct us to the fact that God is far from reluctant but rather willing and generous in answering prayer. So he asked the question, is there anyone among you who if your child asks for a fish will give a snake instead of a fish?

Well, I can only imagine someone doing that as a practical joke and a practical joke probably in bad taste. The issue is somebody asks for something that is good and you give them something that is bad.

Not that you give them something different from what they ask, so he's not saying someone asks you for a fish but instead you give them a roast lamb but rather they ask for a fish and you give them something really nasty, a snake.

[21 : 17] Or if the child asks for an egg, verse 12 says, something good and nourishing, you'll give them a scorpion instead. That is, the issue is not is an egg better than a fish sandwich or a Vegemite sandwich or something.

It's a basic issue of they ask for something good, fundamentally nourishing and you want to give them something bad or evil. Well, of course you don't. No parent, if their child came wanting a fish, would give them a snake.

No parent, when their child came asking for an egg, would give them a scorpion. In fact, snake and scorpion are almost symbols of evil often in the scriptures. So that's the issue here.

And what Jesus is saying is that, well, if you don't expect your parents, human parents, who are sinful people often, if you don't expect them to give you evil things, how much more will God give you what is good?

And that's the thrust of the last verse of this section. If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?

[22 : 31] Notice again the reference back to the Lord's Prayer. Because the Lord's Prayer began, our Father who is in heaven. And here is the reference at the end of this section to the Heavenly Father.

You see, what Jesus is reminding us here as He did at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer is to say that prayer is not banging on the door of some unknown tyrant.

Let me in whoever you are. Prayer is not about trying to establish or begin a relationship with God so much as an expression of a relationship that is already there.

God is our Heavenly Father. Not because we're human beings but because we're Christians. God is our Heavenly Father because of the work of Jesus on the cross for us.

God is our Heavenly Father because of Jesus' work God adopts us into His family and so we can call Him our Heavenly Father and the gift of God's Spirit enables us to call God our Heavenly Father.

[23 : 33] The gift of God's Spirit is in effect a salvation gift to enable us to relate to God as our Father because of the work of Jesus on the cross for us.

So prayer expresses a relationship that is already existing between us and God our Heavenly Father. And even though our human parents are sometimes reluctant to give us things that we might ask for Jesus is saying God is willing and generous to give us exactly what we need which is often better than what we might ask for in effect.

You see Jesus here is teaching how willing how lavish how generous God is to give us the very best gifts of all. Now no doubt like me you've seen parents give astonishing gifts to their children lavish things spoiling them rotten ultimately I'm not sure that it's for their best.

God gives us the very best He lavishes even better things on us not really to spoil us rotten though but to prepare us for heaven to make us like Jesus to trust Him and honour Him.

He supplies our needs not our desires but often He supplies our needs beyond what we need and especially our needs of salvation. And that's why this passage ends as it does how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.

[25 : 11] That is so much of the Lord's prayer and the context of what I've just been talking about is about being saved being a member of God's family and God is promising or Jesus is promising that God the Father will lavish His Holy Spirit on those who ask for it.

salvation is a reference to salvation. There's a sense then in which we've got to remember that Jesus spoke these words while He was on earth. Subsequent to these words He would head to Jerusalem and die on a cross.

He would rise from the dead and 40 days later ascend to heaven. Something that we marked actually last Thursday 40 days after Easter Ascension Day and then a few days later which in a sense will mark next Sunday poured out His Holy Spirit fulfilling promises in the Old Testament such as in the prophet Joel on that day of Pentecost when God's Spirit was evident in the followers of Jesus.

We live after all of those events. If we're Christians we already have God's Holy Spirit. In the time of Jesus on earth even His followers still look forward to the time when God's Spirit would be poured out on all of the followers of God and the people of God.

There's a sense in which we're not quite in this same situation and yet we are because the New Testament elsewhere tells us even as Christians who have the Holy Spirit to keep on praying for God's Spirit to fill us daily regularly in our lives.

[26 : 38] So still this ought to be our sorts of prayers the Lord's Prayer and expecting God to abundantly and lavishly give us His Holy Spirit and everything we need not only on this life but ultimately and more importantly for eternity.

well in this context then what on earth do we do with unanswered prayer? I ought to put unanswered in inverted commas I suppose. Jesus is maybe limited in the scope of what He's saying ask, search and knock means but He's certainly saying you'll have answers to these prayers.

But what happens when we pray for something and we don't seem to get an answer? Is it because we're not knocking loud enough? We're not nagging on our knees enough? Do we need to raise the pitch of our voice like little kids pulling on their mother's apron strings to try and get what they want?

Well in the wider teaching of the New Testament beyond what we can do tonight sometimes our unanswered prayer is a lack of persistence. Sometimes we actually don't pray enough for important things.

I suspect we're all guilty of that I am. How often are you praying that you live a righteous life? How often are you praying for your non-Christian friends to become Christians? How often are you praying that you become like Jesus Christ?

[27:59] How often are you praying that God will be honoured in everything you say and do and think? If you're like me not enough. Are we persistent enough in praying these prayers?

Sometimes that's a reflection of a lack of desire for God's will our own selfishness or pride coming into play. Sometimes our unanswered prayers is because we're praying with wrong motives we're told elsewhere in the New Testament.

That is our prayers may actually be greedy and selfish. That we're not knocking on our neighbour's house to get bread for someone else we're knocking on our neighbour's house to get cake for ourselves perhaps if I can use that sort of illustration.

Maybe we're not praying the right content of prayer. Maybe our whole focus is so worldly that we keep on praying for worldly luxuries worldly comfort worldly pleasures long life long health freedom of pain freedom of stress.

Is that really what God promises to answer? I'm not so sure that it is. Sometimes you see our priorities are a bit skew-ed a bit self-centred not God-centred.

[29:02] The Lord's Prayer is teaching us what to pray and this passage is teaching us to persist in prayer to pray for the very fundamental things. Now all of this put together ought not to put us off praying.

I mean if having read Luke 11 1-4 last week and 5-13 tonight you go away thinking I don't know that I'm going to pray anymore or pray anymore than I already do we've really badly misunderstood all of this.

All of this is an incentive to pray. It's an incentive to have confidence in God who is willing and generous to answer prayer. It's to have confidence in God who wants the very best for us and will lavish upon us exactly what we need for eternity.

It's to urge us to keep praying to persist in praying to pray day and night day after day week after week month after month year after year decade after decade to keep on praying and not to give up praying for the important fundamental things that are priorities in God's kingdom.

This is to encourage us to pray not to put us off praying. We're to pray persistently not in order to somehow twist God's arm behind his back to give in to us but we're to pray persistently to express our priorities to God and because God is gracious to give us.

[30:18] In fact often in the New Testament the injunction is to pray at all times to keep on praying to be alert in prayer to pray at all times pray with thanksgiving at all times.

Those are the common expressions all through the New Testament. This is not the only place that teaches us persistence in prayer. So then how do you pray?

Or ought I ask do you pray? Can you think about it each of you individually when was the last time you got on your knees and you prayed seriously to God?

When did you pray seriously about the matters in the Lord's Prayer? When did you persist in praying day and night for something? Or are your prayers just fleeting thoughts as though you're walking past a shop front window and think oh I'd like that so you shoot up a little arrow prayer to God and that's forgotten then?

How serious are you about praying? How serious are you about the kingdom of God coming? How serious are you about praying for forgiveness and forgiving others? How serious are you about praying for your daily needs from God who is gracious to give?

[31:33] How serious are you about praying for God's Holy Spirit? And what are you doing to make sure that you persist in prayer? Because our hearts and minds are fickle. We're sinful people and Satan will do everything to take us off our knees.

So what are you doing to make sure that you persist in prayer? Are you getting up when the alarm clock rings to pray? Are you making sure that you stop watching TV or do whatever it is at a certain time of night so you've got enough time left to pray?

Are you meeting with someone to pray with them regularly in order to keep each other accountable in prayers? Are you writing a journal to remind yourself to pray? Are you praying for some things day in, day out?

Or are you giving up because it seems that God is not answering? What are you doing to make sure that you are persisting in prayer? How are you correcting your pride which tells you you don't need to pray, you can do it all in your own strength?

How are you resisting the world's view that says, come on, get on with it yourself, this prayer is just a crutch for weak people? Are you persistent in prayer?

[32:50] Are you praying the things God wants you to pray? As we saw last week in the Lord's Prayer, are you praying the prayers of the Bible? Paul writing to various churches, what he prays for them.

You don't see long life and good health and freedom of pain and passing exams there. You see bigger and more important things, fully in accord with the Lord's Prayer. How often are you actually praying the Lord's Prayer and thinking through what you're praying?

How often are you using books of prayers? How often are you using daily notes to read the Bible and to pray what you read in the Bible? How often when you read a Bible verse do you then pray that you'll not only understand it but that your life will be changed as a result of it?

How serious are you about praying? How persistent are you about praying? They often say that the life of a church can be gauged by its prayer meetings.

Well, the life of our church is barely ticking. Because in a church of our size, when we have just 15 people at a monthly prayer meeting, it's somewhat poor.

[34:02] Not that everyone has to be at every prayer meeting, but it's fairly weak. How persistently have you prayed through our 150 days of prayer booklet for those who've been here since January?

Praying for people, praying for this church, praying for yourselves. In the end, as I said before, the word persistence also has this meaning of shamelessness.

And that is, there ought to be no sense of shame in praying to God, in getting on our knees, or standing, whatever our posture is, and asking God.

Nothing to be ashamed of at all. Because the God of the universe, who has this universe in his hands, tells us to pray. He doesn't tell us to go out and do it for ourselves, in our own strength and determination.

He tells us to pray. There's no shame in coming to God, when we've mucked up asking for forgiveness, when we need God's strength, when we ask for his spirit, when we ask for salvation, or for our daily needs.

[35:16] If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

So pray.